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ABSTRACT

A review of descriptions of the composing process and of the analytical tools developed to measure, describe, and judge student writing suggests that a comprehensive theory of evaluation is an important next step for composition theorists and researchers who want to understand how people learn to write. A study involving three groups of writers--professional writers, graduate and undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and a mixture of teachers and professionals indirectly involved in writing--provided data on the self-evaluative experiences of writers. Information gathering for the study included three questionnaires, casual conversations, and regularized advising interviews with students. The results of the informal study revealed that the majority of writers at first resisted engaging in self-evaluation; that they evaluated the quality of their own writing hesitantly; that this hesitancy was for some reified into a sentimental feeling about a piece; and that in describing their self-evaluations of writing they identified three criteria to judge the quality of their work: audience reception, congruence to their original purpose for writing, and the amount of discovery and change in themselves that occurred during the writing process. (AEA)

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Notes for a Theory of Evaluation:

How Writers Judge Their Own Work

For all of the newly conceived descriptions of the composing process, analytical tools to measure, describe, and judge student writing, and testing programs to place in courses or certify the abilities of student writers, composition theorists and researchers are not at present attending to comprehensive views of the quality of written discourse. The most common responses to the process of writing evolve from the writer's sense of how well or poorly a piece turned out; the most common questions we ask and answer about having read anything place the text--novel or student essay--on a spectrum of enjoyability. Yet our theories, professional tools of evaluation, and testing programs neither describe nor account for the undeniable experience of quality stimulated by writing and reading processes. For some time I have been juxtaposing the agon, the play and the struggle, of learning to write, getting better at writing, and being good at it against the theories and practices we at present rely on to account for the quality of written discourse. The disjunction that occurs when I do has led me to reexamine and gather some new information about writers' judgments of their own writing, and to suggest that a comprehensive theory of evaluation is an important next step for those who want to understand how people learn to write.

State-of-the-art views of evaluating writing have their roots in responses to the now worn news that we face a national literacy crisis. Widely known collegiate testing programs like California's, New Jersey's, Wisconsin's,

and Georgia's began as ways to demonstrate that such a crisis was actual. These programs and many like them have been useful levers, for their results, stated in quickly perceived percentages, move teachers and administrators to provide more writing instruction where it is needed and convince students to avail themselves of it. Such programs rely upon and have themselves painstakingly developed descriptions and measurements of writing that are quickly becoming necessary tools for most academically sound evaluations of writing. Well-informed teachers regularly refer to O'Dell and Cooper's Evaluating Writing,[1] to the Fall, 1979 issue of Basic Writing on evaluation, or the December, 1979 College Composition and Communication annotated bibliography on testing.[2]

The results of controlled testing of student writers, those easily recalled percentages, have fortunately offered alternatives to many hitherto opinionated and prejudiced evaluations. Yet such results represent social scientists' methodologically limited responses to data. Testing programs and many individual teachers have appropriated statistical theory that permits measurements of writing against relative time and relative frequency counts--counts of words/per, or errors/per, or changes/per. We can validly or reliably count the surface features of prose or read it against models to form impressions of its relative qualities, but these measurements of error, syntactic maturity, holistic scores, primary features, or of relative readability do not account for the energy and intentionality that most recent theorists accept as crucial to reading and writing.[3]

No one has attempted to synthesize such new theories with current views of evaluation. The useful, careful work that developed a new taxonomy of

evaluative probes took place before a complete theory was sought; our technology is so far ahead of our philosophy of evaluation that the tail threatens now to wag, if not become, the dog.

There are of course good and obvious reasons why there is now no comprehensive theory of evaluation. Even our most enlightened theories of discourse and of reading still labor under the results of New Critical and positivistic attitudes toward an earlier, notorious subjectivity. Although it is a critical commonplace to reject, for instance, Wimsatt's doctrine of the equality of criticism and explication, this doctrine still implicitly supports most of the machinery of measurement now widely used. We are still most comfortable with "objective" descriptions of texts, however such descriptions may ignore most of the questions rhetoricians ask about a text's audience or its author's and reader's situation. Louise Rosenblatt, in The Reader, the Text and the Poem, has pointed out that the New Critics "allegedly impersonal analysis of form and technique" [4] distorts the experience of reading discourse, but even she shies away from developing a theory of evaluative reading that would contribute to a complete and useful description of the universals in individuals' experiences of quality. She says that Touchstone's judgment of Audrey, "A poor thing, but mine own," may describe the completely personal nature of some readers' tastes.[5] By resting here, she avoids the evaluative issue raised by persistent hope and evidence that we often agree with the

unsophisticated that some writing is better than others of its kind and intent, whether done by students or professionals, in whatever genre.[6] We confess to having liked one novel or Shakespearian play better than another and to enjoying some student writing without a qualm, as readily as we worry about whether others will like what we write.

But disciplinary avoidance of evaluative issues only partly explains our current willingness to accept frequency counts or holistic ratings as sufficient results about the quality of student writing. With what I think is confusion between precise and metaphoric uses of the term, composition theorists are looking for paradigms, replicable structures of functional relations, for the composing process. Inadvertently, we are then led to think of the processes of composing and reading texts as paradigmatic despite continuing witness to the essentially syntagmatic, sequential, temporal, nature of both acts. The evaluative models we now so heavily rely on, which are paradigmatic, do not begin to answer questions about how well a particular writer may do what is intended for a particular audience bound to read at a particular time and for a particular reason.

There are hopeful signs that we will soon have a theory that comprehends all of our experiences with a discourse. Teaching and describing the grammar of English have now repeatedly been shown not much to affect the language a writer produces, however they may affect abilities to revise and edit what is produced. Considering that Shakespeare wrote before the first English grammar book was used in the schools, we are not very surprised about foregoing grammar drills in favor of instruction about the process of writing itself. We have tacitly abandoned many of the discourse

analysts' paradigmatic approaches to composition instruction, leaving behind many textbooks' outlines, key holes, and inverted pyramids for new involvement in actual writing processes.[7] We have begun to substitute descriptions of how writers revise for revision checklists.[8] But toward evaluation there has been, on the contrary, an explosion of paradigmatic approaches. In spite of other hopeful signs in applications of syntagmatic analysis to the initial stages of writing a piece, we are boxed in at present by a methodology that assumes it is valuable to devise a grammar of evaluation to be applied at the last stage of writing, only after a piece is separated from its writer and his or her intention toward specific readers. There is no theory or common practice that attempts to capture the quality of a piece in relation to what its author could, should, or would have written.

Such a theory of evaluation would not exclude the paradigms for describing the measuring writing that we now have in hand. But it would subordinate the categories of a grammar of evaluation to the pragmatics of experiencing the quality of a text. Without such subordination, the purportedly objective descriptions of variable qualities of prose may become, as syntactic maturity measurements are rapidly becoming,[9] substitutions for reasonable and complete judgments about the quality of written discourse. Paradigms of evaluation do not influence, but (like New Critical tools of explication) instead prevent discussing, the issue of quality in prose.

Because I want to raise this issue, and begin to formulate an evaluative theory, I have been collecting data about the most notoriously subjective variable of evaluation, writers' opinions of their own writing. I began to

notice ten years ago that when I asked students after a test how well they had written, they could tell me. As the final court of appeal for the last several years in placement and proficiency testing for about five thousand students, I have so frequently noted the accuracy of students' opinions about how well they have written--by my lights, their lights, or the trained raters' lights--that I have become curious about how they know. If writers in the role of "student," where error and mistakes and corrections and the possibility of failure make up the matrix of evaluation can so often accurately judge their own work, how do professional writers--whose work resides in a matrix formed by successes, improvement, progress, and potential fame--also identify the best and worst of their writing? What is the process of self-evaluation, who shares it, and how is it related to the entire experience of writing?

While reading and stimulating writers' answers to these questions, I have not investigated processes of revision or decisions about whether to revise. Such choices sometimes are relevant to a writer's evaluative experience and were often mentioned, but my questions have focused on final, after-the-fact judgments analogous to the results of the programmatic professional tools of evaluation I described above.

Three groups of writers provided the data for this interim report. First, professional writers: contemporary poets, novelists, or story-writers whose comments on their work have been published or who have responded to written or interview questions. Second, undergraduate and graduate students, some three hundred, either enrolled in writing or composition theory courses at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, or seeking advice about their failure

on the writing sample portion of the College's English Proficiency examination. And, third, a lopsided group of teachers and other professionals: the directors and leaders of writing programs in the CIC schools who meet each year at Purdue, some feature writers for the Milwaukee Journal, and fiction and trade editors at major publishing houses in New York who were interviewed not about themselves, but about the evaluative procedures of some of their authors.

From these sources, whether in the form of conversations for published reports, I have aimed to arrive at a description of the ways that writers experience the quality of their own writing. My methods have been necessarily various. Both because settings for gathering information were inevitably fragmented and because this question is not often systematically asked, I used an over-determined methodology that included three questionnaires, casual conversations, and regularized advising interviews with students. Each of the methods informed its successor. Some of those interviewed asked for anonymity, so will not be cited. The questionnaires used included a crudely flawed ten-question poll answered in ten composition classes and a two part questionnaire used in classes, at a meeting and by mail. (The first administration asked "what is the best thing you have ever written?, what features of the piece make it your best?, and when in the process of writing--before, during, or after--did you realize it was your best?" The later administration asked these questions in relation to the writer's "worst" work.) Some people responded to one but not the other set of questions; some combined their answers in one complex response. Consequently, the results reported below sometimes rely on cautious interpretations. Only published accounts or responses elicited in one or another form by all of the questionnaires and interviews

are included in the percentages below. (For example, students responding in any situation referred to audience response as a way of explaining their experiences of quality.) When the setting of an unpublished response may have influenced the respondent, I have suggested that possibility.

In view of this variety, the results may be summarized in surprisingly clear categories. Although important distinctions emerged between writers in the two roles of student or non-student, those whose self-evaluations are oriented toward possible failure, or those whose self-evaluations are success-oriented, about 70% of all of the writers surveyed, whether reporting in person or in a published interview, first resisted engaging in self-evaluation. Sometimes the question was casually put to them; in the case of authors interviewed for the Paris Review fourth series of Writers At Work [10] and those who chose their best stories for Rust Hills' Writers' Choice [11]

anthology, some were already seriously committed to answering questions about the quality of their work. But in any setting, writers first demur from questions about failure and success. Students who have failed an examination, authors who have won the Nobel prize, scholars who write and publically talk about evaluations of student writing, and graduate students in courses on composition theory usually respond initially to qualitative questions by avoiding them. They cannot choose their favorite child, they never think about finished work, they claim to have never addressed the issue of the quality of their writing at all.

Analogous to this response, although easily distinguishable from it, was a rare but notable tendency for some writers in each of the groups to respond emotionally. Truman Capote, for instance, said only that he was "attached" to it to explain why he chose "Children on Their Birthdays" as his best short story;[12] one of the CIC program directors wrote of being enduringly "moved" by his best writing. Mindless fondness for some writing was matched by blind rejection of other writing. Some writers, especially students, spoke only of becoming physically ill when they thought of their worst pieces. The few respondents in this category from a total group of three hundred usually had little more to say, even after prodding, about the quality of their work.

But in the majority of writers, even those who first claim never to have given quality a moment's thought, move when they are prodded into questions of quality and then report surprisingly thorough self-evaluations. Once they begin, they then report three kinds of qualitative experiences whose nature, frequency, and universality among the groups questioned sur-

prised me. Many writers, especially those like Nabokov and Borges who are most proficient, mention all three kinds of evaluative experiences; few who are not students report only one way of relating to the quality of their writing. (Normal Mailer said he had only written two short stories and had no ground for judgment.) [13]

One kind of evaluative experience, its frequent occurrence swelled in this survey by a disproportionately large number of student participants, is locating the quality of writing in the reception of the audience. Almost all of the students I surveyed, whether undergraduate or graduate, thought of their good writing as writing the teacher likes. This is hardly surprising because another teacher or I asked the question. But in addition, 30% of the professional novelists, poets, and academic writers mention that their sense of success and failure in writing depends on positive response a reading public or an important reader gives.

The second mode of self-evaluation that writers frequently reported, one that has been documented elsewhere in research about the revision processes of poets,[14] was experiencing the quality of a piece in relation to how well the finished product fulfilled the original vision, what I have come to call the prevision, they had for a piece. The comment, "I did what I set out to do," is frequently recorded in published interviews, and editors speak of succeeding by helping authors do what they originally had had in mind.[15] It is tempting to take such a remark lightly, as it is to overlook much of what writers express about their ways of experiencing the quality of their own work, but the frequency of this statement and the detail with which some of

the interviewed authors and editors elaborated what they meant by this judgment convinced me that this method of comparing the result to what the author had originally "seen" in the mind's eye is an important evaluative experience.

The third frequently cited kind of self-evaluation was located in the process of writing itself. Thirty-two percent of the professional writers, many of whom acknowledged that their work had not in one or another instance been particularly well-received, still thought of their best writing as the one piece in which they had learned or mastered a particular technique, or had managed a characteristic theme in a way that taught them what they meant. The authors choosing their best stories frequently used the word "discovery"; many spoke of "learning." This mode of self-evaluation values the experience of writing itself and often decides about the relatively high quality of one piece by noticing that the author's writing was thereafter changed. Many people said that they did not like a particular piece because, however well-received it had been, they had learned nothing or discovered nothing while writing it.

Unfortunately, student writers rarely report that they value writing for discovery's sake, at least not writing that is evaluated by teachers or testing programs. The responses of students asked to evaluate a failed essay examination were, however, surprisingly parallel to the professional writers' other two criteria for self-evaluation. Once students were convinced that they could not change their grades by claiming that an essay was fine or at least good enough, most of them honestly reported a failure of prevision and said they had known all along that the essay had not been good. They did not,

many said, "get into" the essay topic--a slang phrase that precisely demonstrates how important entering a transient, fictionalized, simulated world is to experiencing either failure or success. Equally interesting, many failing students simply did not know that the readers really expected what the assignment had called for. Students who could alone calmly correct all of their errors said that they had not thought about the audience. They didn't believe we testers had meant it when we said to state one idea or to proofread. Once they did know that we had, they expressed, rather willingly, feelings of failure. When they understood the criteria of audience response, they then experienced feelings about quality they had not previously had.

I also found a significant negative result. With the exception of the English professors and graduate students attending the Big Ten writing directors' conference, none of the writers interviewed, student or professional, mentioned what might be called critical judgments of their work. The positive qualities of the sentences, form, dialogue, plot, or style of a piece were never mentioned. Those few academics who did enjoy what one called "the most glorious sentence I ever wrote" may have been influenced by what they thought to be the nature of my interest and the context in which questions were asked. But in general, writers are not themselves axiologists interested in the good; they do not mention noticing how well a piece meets paradigms for genres, content, or form. The formal terms we teach to analysts of literature or the criteria we state and measure in evaluations of student writing are not transferred to writers' self-evaluative experiences.

To summarize, my investigation revealed that writers experience the quality of their own writing hesitantly, that this hesitancy is for some

reified into an emotional, or sentimental, feeling about a piece, and that when and if they later describe their self-evaluations of writing they identify three criteria that guide their experiences of its quality. They talk about the quality of the work in relation to audience reception, the congruence of the work with its author's original vision of intention, and the amount of discovery and change that occurred during the process of writing itself. Professional writers and others not in school are more likely to identify more than one of these criteria than student writers are. Students usually experience the quality of their writing only in relation to audience reception; those I surveyed never mentioned discovery during the process of writing, but did sometimes note that a piece failed because they had not had a vision of what they wanted to accomplish by writing. Finally, writers do not associate formal paradigms that describe genres or style or correctness with their feelings about the quality of a completed piece.

Analyzing these results reveals, if not a full-blown evaluative theory, some indications of the shape of one. Starting with the absence of reports that writers experience the quality of a piece in relation to paradigmatic criteria either taught in writing courses or codified in literary analysis, the first hypothesis that might emerge from this study is that the experience of self evaluation is distinct from the experience of revision and does not depend on it. Writers obviously recognize and apply paradigmatic criteria for good styles and correctness when they revise; they add, delete, substitute, and rearrange according to formal notions of ideal meaning and execution. They do not, however, think of such models and criteria when they experience the quality of their own work. Self-evaluation, worry or

pleasure about how well they have written, may follow the writing process, but it is evidently not the same experience that motivates revision.

The qualitatively distinct nature of self-evaluation sheds light on writers' almost universal initial hesitations (or inabilities) to experience it. The revisor who may still change or who wishes to change what has been written thinks of the paradigmatic criteria that may describe a genre of literature or the grammar, syntax, and form of expository prose. But once a work has been crystallized, whether by a deadline or a publication, writers must abandon revision criteria. The hesitation to enter a new frame of reference, to let go of a piece, is easily verified by our own experiences as writers and teachers.

But the significance of this hesitation is often unremarked. Roman Ingarden in "Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Object" noted an analogous hesitation before moving to the final stage of the experience of a work of art. The auditor goes from emotional "searching disquietude" to qualitatively different intellectual comparative judgments that admit the possibility of condemnation and negative feeling.[16] These possibilities clearly explain refusals to move from engagement in fantasy revisions to self-evaluation; such a movement, reported by many of the writers whose responses I recorded as a change from being "the writer" to being "a reader" of their own prose, could prematurely intervene in the writing process. Anthony Burgess, for instance, noted that he had at times prevented himself from completing work by judging it too soon.[17] Thus the resistance to self-evaluation I found may be analyzed as functional and healthy; experiencing the quality of our own work while it is either actually or imagina-

tively still possible to change it interferes with, or ends, any sense of "work in progress."

Sentimental relationships to our own writing, whether they be mindlessly fond or blindly rejecting, waffle between working involvement with the work's possibilities and the later view--finally classifying this one creative experience among others like it. Thus a second hypothesis might be that self-evaluation, or judgment, should not be encouraged or engaged in prematurely, lest the writer be prevented from either revisions or even completion of a work.

Whether self-evaluation should be considered and encouraged at all is also commented upon by these results. The three criteria available to writers engaged in such judgment--intention, discovery and change, and audience reception--so clearly rehearse currently trusted descriptions of the process of composing that we might also hypothesize that self-evaluation internalizes the experience of writing itself. If this is true, pedagogy that measures writing only against paradigmatic criteria rather than also urging each writer to experience a feeling of its quality would disallow or retard transferring one learning experience to others following it. It may be that student practice, writing many pieces of prose, is less effective than it would be if self-evaluations of these practices were encouraged.

My discovery that professional writers and professionals not in school so much more frequently than students spontaneously reported more than one of the three modes of self-evaluation also affirms the value of self-evaluation. It is tempting to deduce that "good writers" have many

more self-evaluative experiences than poor ones do and thus to conclude that developing writing abilities depends on developing evaluative perspectives in each writer. Such a hypothesis could certainly be tested. At present, however, I would only note that people who continue to write after writing is no longer an assigned school task do have more kinds of self-evaluative experiences. It seems reasonable to suggest that varieties of such judgments reinforce a person's identity as "one who writes," for the development of an evaluative matrix marks the difference between unself-consciousness and self-conscious artistry and craftsmanship in any productive endeavor.

Completing any project without later valuing it personally in relation to similar experiences seems to thwart internalizing new images of ourselves as potentially active in that particular realm of endeavor. Phenomenological theorists have noticed this and often maintain that taking a stand about the relation of an event to one's authentic personal values completes that event by resolving it, integrating it into the self. Without such judgments, events are not occasions for growth into new roles; those who cook only to eat do not become chefs.

I can conclude, then, with a final hypothesis, that self-evaluation is crucial to the development of an individual's perception of writing as an important and "natural" way to investigate problems and represent ideas. Such a conclusion does not offer a comprehensive evaluative theory that would subsume the current technology of measurement, but it does suggest that further investigation of writers' processes of judgment and their relation to those measurements could lead to such a theory. Were each of my hypotheses to be

tested in other settings, we might discover a theory and a new pedagogy that would in some measure rely on students' opinions of the relative quality of their pieces in order to discern their strengths and weaknesses as student writers.

Notes

[1] Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1977).

[2] Regina M. Hoover, "An Annotated Bibliography on Testing," CCCC, 30, (1979), 384-92.

[3] E.g., James Britton, "The Composing Process and the Functions of Writing," in Research on Composing, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1978), pp. 13-28; James L. Kinneavy, "The Relation of the Whole to the Part in Interpretation Theory and in the Composing Process," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Ackron, Ohio: Department of English, 1979), pp. 1-23.

[4] (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 139.

[5] Rosenblatt, p. 141.

[6] The hope was monumentally expressed by I.A. Richards, Practical Criticism (1929; rpt. New York: Harvest Books).

[7] E.g., Janet Emig, The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, NCTE Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1971) has been widely influential in this respect.

[8] Nancy Sommers, "Revision in the Composing Process: A Case Study of Experienced Writers and Student Writers," Diss. Boston Univ. 1979.

[9] The relative value of such measurements is capably criticized by Joseph M. Williams, "Non-Linguistic Linguistics and the Teaching of Style," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, pp. 24-40.

[10] George Plimpton, ed., (1976; rpt. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1977). This is the only volume of these interviews in which self-evaluations were overtly solicited; Plimpton's introduction (ix-xv) rehearses his dissatisfaction with questions asked for earlier volumes. The included writers whose responses are summarized in this study are Aiken, Graves, Dos Passos, Nabokov, Borges, Seferis, Steinbeck, Isherwood, Welty, Berryman, Burgess, and Kerouac.

[11] Rust Hills, ed., Writer's Choice (New York: Longman, 1974). The writers anthologized each wrote introductions explaining why they chose the story printed as their best. They include Barth, Barthelmae, Calisher, Capote, Cassill, Connell, Elkin, Elliott, Friedman, Gold, James Jones, Mailer, Miller, Price, Purdy, Roth, Southern, Updike, Thomas Williams, and Yates. In addition, comments on self-evaluation appear in Floyd C. Watkins and Karl F. Knight, eds., Writer to Writer: Readings on the Craft of Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966). Writers in this volume who address self-evaluation are Max J. Herzberg, William Saroyan, John Ciardi, Robert Penn Warren, Stephen Leacock, and Jesse Stuart.

[12] Writer's Choice, p. 49.

[13] Writer's Choice, p. 251.

[14] Gabriel M. Della-Piana, "Research Strategies for the Study of Revision Processes in Writing Poetry," in Research on Composing, pp. 105-34.

[15] E.g., Anne Freedgood (executive editor, Vintage Books and Modern Library, Random House), Pat Strachan (editor, Farror, Straus & Giroux) in Nancy Evans, "Line Editors: The Rigorous Pursuit of Perfection," Publisher's Weekly, 15 Oct. 1979, pp. 24-31.

[16] In Nathaniel Lawrence and Daniel O'Connor, eds., Readings in Existential Phenomenology (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 319.

[17] Writers at Work, p. 332.